

Mark 7:19b – A Short Technical Note

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Mark 7:18–19 is a text to which many refer when they are arguing that Yeshua did away with the the Torah.

And He said to them, “Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?” (Thus He declared all foods clean.) [NASB]

This belief, that Yeshua did away with the Torah, is argued from this text by logical inference: since Yeshua seems clearly to dismiss the Torah laws of clean and unclean foods, it stands to reason that He likewise could be dismissing the whole Torah. If one law of the Torah has been rendered irrelevant, the possibility exists that others have been likewise set aside, and all the more so since the Torah is presented as a unified whole by the Scriptures themselves. For instance, James says, “For whoever keeps the whole Torah and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all (James 2:10).

What is confusing, however, is that in Matthew, Yeshua teaches that not even the least of the commandments has been annulled (Matthew 5:17–18). How could He have taught the eternal viability of the Torah on one hand, and then dismissed the laws of clean and unclean food so clearly laid out in the Torah on the other?

The crux of the Mark 7:19 revolves around the last phrase of that verse, and particularly the word meaning “to make clean,” καθαρίζω, *katharizo*. First, the fact that there is a textual variant relating to this word has given rise to different translations. The Textus Receptus, following the later manuscripts, has καθαρίζον πάντα τὰ βρώματα.¹ The verb, καθαρίζον, is parsed as a neuter participle. But the older and more reliable manuscripts have καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα, where the verb is a masculine participle. From a text critical standpoint, we should reckon that the original reading is καθαρίζων (masculine singular nominative participle) rather than καθαρίζον (neuter singular nominative participle) on the obvious weight of the textual evidence.

We may ask what would have prompted some scribes to change the masculine to the neuter form of the participle? Apparently, the scribes had difficulty understanding what stood as the subject of the participle. Since the obvious meaning seems to be that the elimination of excrement is the subject, the neuter gender for the participle seemed the correct reading (corresponding to the unspecified noun σῶμα, “body” or to the process of elimination itself). Thus, the preceding phrase, ἐκπορεύεσθαι εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα, “it goes out into the latrine,” has the bodily process of elimination in view, and thus the subject of the following participle would be the unnamed “it” of the verb ἐκπορεύεσθαι. In this way, the final phrase means “it (i.e., body or the excrement itself) purges all foods,” and is reflected in the KJV, “...and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats.” The Greek nouns utilized to describe human excrement are κόπριον (neuter), κόπρον or κόπρος (either neuter or masculine),² and σκύβαλον (neuter), meaning “garbage, refuse,” but which can also refer to human excrement (cp. Sirach 27:4). Thus, the impetus for changing the masculine form to read as a neuter would have been to clear up any ambiguity

1. The UBS³ lists the following data: καθαρίζων **κ** A B L W X Δ Θ ^f ^f3 28 565 892 1009 1071 1216 1241 1242 1253 1546 1646 Byz^{pt} ^f49, 184, 211, 299, 950, 1761 syr^{p, h} cop^{sa, bo} eth Origen Gregory-Nyssa Chrysostom // καθαρίζον K Π 33 700 1010 1079 1195 1230 1344 1365 2148 2174 Byz^{pt} Lect Diatessaron^a // καθαρίζων or καθαρίζον it^{a, aur, b, c, d, f, ff2, l, n, q} vg // και καθαρίζεται (1047 omit και) syr^a // καθαρίζων τε ^l70 // και καθαρίζει (D ^l185 omit και) it^{i, r1} (goth omit και) arm geo

2. The ambiguity of κόπρον/κόπρος is noted by *BDAG* (ad loc.). Since κόπρον may be parsed as either feminine or neuter (where no other gender indicators are present), in some text it may function as a neuter noun, like its corresponding noun, κόπριον, as in Lk 13:8, though *BDAG* would favor the masculine parsing.

as to the subject of the participle. It is the body itself or the process of elimination (or the excrement) that brings about the purging or cleansing the body of that which is unclean.³

The earlier manuscripts, however, almost universally have καθαρίζων, which is masculine singular. In this case, the closest antecedent masculine singular noun is ἀφεδρών, “latrine.” However, there is a grammatical problem. Participles generally must agree in gender, number, and case with the noun to which they attach. In the phrase ἐκπορεύεσθαι εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρώνα, the word ἀφεδρώνα is in the accusative case, while the following participle, καθαρίζων, is in the nominative case. When one first reads the sentence, it would appear that the latrine (ἀφεδρών) is the logical antecedent of the nominative singular masculine καθαρίζων, giving the meaning “it goes out into the latrine, and thus the latrine purges all foods.” But the fact that the participle does not agree in case with the word ἀφεδρώνα seems to render this reading impossible, since ἀφεδρώνα, the object of preposition εἰς, is necessarily in the accusative case.

Seeking for the subject of the participle καθαρίζων becomes, therefore, the *crux interpretum* for the passage. What or who “cleanses all foods?” Most modern translations add the words “thus He declared” to the dangling participle phrase “cleansing all foods,” in order to inform the readers that the subject of the participle, as far as the translators are concerned, is Yeshua. This interpretation goes back as far as Origen,⁴ where the subject of the nominative masculine participle is traced in the context to v. 18 and the implied subject of λέγει, “He said,” i.e., Yeshua said. It is therefore suggested that Yeshua is likewise the subject of the masculine participle, and the final participial clause is therefore understood to mean “He (Yeshua) is cleansing all foods.” But how would Yeshua cleanse all foods? The answer is that He cleansed all foods by *declaring* all foods clean, and thus the added “*He declared* all foods clean.”

Rudolph, in his article “Yeshua and the Dietary Laws: A Reassessment of Mark 7:19b,”⁵ concludes that this is the only possible explanation for the nominative singular participle:

The NA²⁷ Greek text of Mark 7:19b reads καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα (literally: “cleansing all the foods”). Most English translations turn this dangling participial clause into a Markan insertion by placing it within parentheses and adding the words at the beginning “(thus he declared...)” (NRSV) or “(In saying this, Yeshua declared...)” (NIV Prophecy Edition). The reader is left with the impression that Mark is summarizing the significance of Yeshua’s teaching in the previous verses. In support of such a translation, it should be noted that καθαρίζων (“cleansing”) is nominative masculine. Thus, Yeshua is the one who is doing the cleansing and not the body as indicated by the textual variant καθαρίζον.⁶

Is this true? Does the fact that the participle καθαρίζων is nominative masculine mean that its only possible subject within the immediate context is Yeshua? Actually, there is another alternative. It is well known in Greek grammar that the nominative singular participle may sometimes refer to something within the previous context or to something implied in the context not explicitly mentioned, even though it may not be in the same grammatical case.⁷ Note the following examples:

Luke 24:47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations,

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3. Note the comments of Henrich Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-book to the Gospels of Mark and Luke* (Funk & Wagnalls, 1884), p. 89–90 [Reprinted by Hendrickson Pub., 1983].
 4. Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, Book 12, section 11.
 5. David J. Rudolph, “Jesus and the Food Laws: A Reassessment of Mark 7:19b,” *EQ* 74:4 (2002), 291–311; updated and revised in “Yeshua and the Dietary Laws: A Reassessment of Mark 7:19b,” *Kesher* 16 (Fall, 2003), 97–119.
 6. *Ibid.*, *Kesher* 16 (Fall, 2003), 97–8.
 7. See F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Univ. of Chicago, 1961), p. 76, §137(3); James Hope Moulton and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 3 vols. (T&T Clark, 1963), 3.316; Maximilian Zerwick S. J., *Biblical Greek* (Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), pp. 5–6.

beginning from Jerusalem. (καὶ κρυχθῆναι ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ μετάνοιαν εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, ἀρξάμενοι ἀπο Ἱερουσαλήμ). The participle in the clause “beginning from Jerusalem” is nominative masculine plural, but there is no nominative masculine plural noun in the preceding context to act as its antecedent. It presumes an understood subject in the infinitival clause κρυχθῆναι...μετάνοιαν, “to preach...repentance,” something like αὐτοὶ κηρύξουσιν...μετάνοιαν...ἀρξάμενοι ἀπο Ἱερουσαλήμ, “they preach...repentance...beginning from Jerusalem.” A similar construction is found in Acts 10:37 (where some manuscripts attempt to smooth out the incongruence).

2Thess 1:8 dealing out retribution to those who do not know God (ἐν πυρὶ φλογός, διδόντος ἐκδίκησιν τοῖς μὴ εἰδόσιν θεόν), where διδόντος, “dealing out” is masculine singular genitive, but refers to the previous angels (v. 7, ἀγγέλων), which is masculine plural genitive.

James 3:8 But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. (τὴν δὲ γλῶσσαν οὐδεὶς δαμάσαι δύναται ἀθρώπων, ἀκατάστατον κακόν, μεστή ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου). Here, the adjectival phrase, “restless evil” (ἀκατάστατον κακόν) is nominative masculine singular, but it modifies τὴν γλῶσσαν, which is accusative feminine singular.

Interestingly, the Greek Grammars (see footnote 7 above) also reference Mark 7:19b as an example of a nominative masculine participle that does not agree in case with its apparent antecedent.

For those who take λέγει, “He (Yeshua) said” as the antecedent for the participle καθαρίζων, (thus, “He (Yeshua) declared ...”), appeal is made to the Lxx of Leviticus 13, where the priest pronounces a person clean or unclean, depending upon the various attended circumstances. Here are two examples:

Lev. 13:6 “The priest shall look at him again on the seventh day, and if the infection has faded and the mark has not spread on the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean (καθαριεῖ αὐτὸν ὁ ἱερεὺς); it is only a scab. And he shall wash his clothes and be clean.

Lev. 13:23 “But if the bright spot remains in its place and does not spread, it is only the scar of the boil; and the priest shall pronounce him clean (καθαριεῖ αὐτὸν ὁ ἱερεὺς).

In these instances, the verb καθαρίζω means “to declare someone clean,” and it is reasoned therefore that the same verb in Mark 7:19 could bear a similar meaning. But this could only be the case if the final clause is understood as the Evangelist’s own editorial comment.

Those who take the final phrase of our text as an editorial comment by Mark do so primarily on two grounds: 1) that καθαρίζων requires a masculine noun for its antecedent, and the closest such antecedent is the masculine singular subject of λέγει in v. 18, and 2) that Mark is known to interject his own explanatory comments, an example of which is the lengthy editorial comment at the beginning of this same chapter (7:3–4). Since Mark finds it necessary to explain the general *halalchah* of the Pharisees and Judeans, it is reasoned that he must be addressing a Gentile audience, and this gives cause for his parenthetical comment at the end of v. 19: Yeshua is reassuring the Gentile believers “that the Jewish food laws were not obligatory for them.”⁸ This, in a nutshell, is the conclusion of Rudolph’s article.⁹

But paralleling the final clause of Mark 7:19 with the previous editorial comments (7:3–4) is a bit tenuous. In the first place, the explanatory insertion in vv. 3–4 is lengthy, and is clearly part of the narrative exposition, necessary for setting up the narrative scene to follow. But if v. 19b is also an editorial addition by Mark, it is unclear how it functions in light of the pericope as a whole. The issue at hand was the accusation against Yeshua’s disciples, that they fail to follow the *halalchah* of the elders,

8. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (John Knox, 1990), p. 45.

9. (see footnote 3 above)

because they do not wash their hands before they eat. Yeshua's response is not to negate all of the traditions of the elders, but to put them in their proper place, that is, subordinate to God's commandments. His emphasis is upon the weightier matters of the Torah that are being neglected in favor of the traditions of the elders. So, as usual, He goes to the heart of the issue: loving God and loving one's neighbor. He uses the fifth Word (honoring father and mother) as His primary example because it bridges these two aspects of the Ten Words.¹⁰ Yeshua also notes what an evil heart brings forth: "evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness" (vv. 21–22). These are things that ultimately defile, not eating food with unwashed hands (cp. the parallel account in Matthew 15). That is because what comes into the heart is not so easily purged, and also because that which defiles the heart also causes others to be defiled, for it is duplicated through one's actions and speech. In contrast, that which enters the bowel is quickly purged, and if done so in the proper place, does not defile others.

So one wonders how, from this emphasis of Yeshua, Mark could come to the honest conclusion that He was suspending the Torah laws of clean and unclean foods for the Gentiles? To put it simply: if Mark has interjected v. 19b as his *halachic* deduction from Yeshua's teachings, it seems as though he missed the point. Moreover, Yeshua's words take on a more universal aspect, for Mark construes His teaching using ἄνθρωπος: "there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him" (Mark 7:15). This appears as a universal axiom, not something that is constrained by Jewish vs. Gentile boundaries.¹¹ For Mark to have derived *halalchah* specific to Gentile believers from this saying of Yeshua appears to have missed the heart of Yeshua's teaching in this instance.

Secondly, in describing the particular action of the Pharisees and Judeans (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) in the opening narrative exposition (vv. 3–4), Mark uses indicative verbs (οὐκ ἐσθίουσιν, "they do not eat," used twice, v. 3 and 4). He uses the participle (κρατοῦντες τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, "holding to the traditions of the elders") to indicate normative or characteristic action of the Pharisees and Judeans. In the supposed parallel to v. 19b, the participle καθαρίζων should thus bespeak normative or characteristic action on the part of Yeshua (at least from Mark's perspective). Thus, the meaning would be "He (Yeshua) regularly declared all foods clean." If in fact this final clause of v. 19 is the Evangelist's own declarative statement regarding *halalchah* for Gentile believers, we would have expected him to use the indicative rather than a participial form (and most likely an aorist indicative). In fact, the modern English translations, in order to cast the final phrase of our text as an editorial affirmation on the part of Mark, construe the participle in precisely this manner: "(Thus He declared all foods clean)," (NASB, NRSV, ESV,); "(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean')," NIV.

Therefore, to interpret Mark 7:19b as the *halachic* conclusion of the Evangelist himself, directed to the Gentiles but not to the Jewish people, seems to raise more difficulties than it solves.

But the need to understand the final clause of v. 19 as Mark's editorial conclusion is removed if, in fact, καθαρίζων can have an antecedent with which it does not share grammatical concord (as noted above). In this case, the antecedent of καθαρίζων could be either ἀφ᾽ ἐδρώνων ("latrine") or the excrement itself (which is spoken of only euphemistically as that which goes out into the latrine). This allows the final clause of v. 19 to function normally as the conclusion of Yeshua's argument, namely, that as it pertains to food, what comes forth from the bowel does not defile, because it goes out into the latrine and is properly purged. In contrast, what comes out of the heart does defile, both the one from whom it

10. What I mean by this is that the Ten Words may be grouped as those directed primarily to God (Words 1-4) and those pertaining primarily to one's neighbor (Words 6-10). Thus, the Ten Words encompass "loving God" and "loving one's neighbor." The 5th Word, the command to honor one's parents, is the "bridge" between the two halves of the Ten Words, for loving God as Father is first understood by a recognition of one's earthly father. Or to put it another way, honoring and submitting to the authority of one's parents is the first step in understanding what it means to honor and submit to God as one's Father.

11. This use of ἄνθρωπος may be understood as universal (=mankind) all the more because of Mark's repeated use of "son(s) of man" terminology, cf. Mark 2:10, 28; 3:28; 8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 13:26; 14:21, 41, 62; 15:39.

proceeds as well as others. Therefore, Yeshua's teaching is that one should be more concerned about what goes into, and comes forth from the heart rather than whether one eats food with hands that have not been washed.

In the final analysis, even though the best reading of the text is καθαρίζων (masculine singular nominative), it can be understood as essentially the same *in meaning* as the inferior reading καθαρίζον. Grammatically, it is perfectly warranted to translate Mark 7:18–19 as follows:

18 And He said to them, “Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, 19 because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and goes out into the latrine, cleansing all foods (from the body)?